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Essay submission for "How and Why Language Learning is Useful in China Careers"

October 21-23, 2016

INTRODUCTION

When I began my undergraduate years at Princeton University in 2004, I wanted to study a difficult language. I nearly took Arabic. I chose Chinese instead, a decision that affected the course of my life for years afterward.

My first Mandarin professor was Dr. E. Perry Link. We began by studying traditional characters and using the GR Romanization system, which Dr. Link said would help give us a stronger foundation for Chinese than simplified characters and pinyin. I believe he was right.

Dr. Link was strict on pronunciation of the tones in Mandarin. He made students repeat words and sentences multiple times during lectures to correct their tones. He explained some aspects of Chinese in amusing, memorable ways. For instance, Dr. Link explained that the Chinese "e" sound, as in the word 饿 for "to be hungry," was equivalent to the sound made by the letter "u" in the word "under" when pronounced with an American Southern accent. He also once provided us with a sample sentence that translates as, "I have both yo-yos and oil." In Chinese, he said, this would be, "*Wǒ yǒu yǒu yōu yōu yǒu yǒu yóu.*"

Dr. Link also advised me during my undergraduate years as I explored possible summer activities and employment involving China. Dr. Link's guidance, along with generous funding that I received from the East Asian Studies department and other entities at Princeton, helped me to develop my interest in China and to have several successful years working in Beijing after I graduated.

I had many other helpful and dedicated Chinese teachers besides Dr. Link. I attended the Princeton in Beijing summer program in 2005 and continued to take Mandarin for every semester at Princeton until I graduated in 2008. I fondly remember class with Dr. Chih-p'ing Chou and am grateful for his help in my studies.

So, how has speaking Chinese helped me in life, and in particular in cross-cultural work?

1: JOB OPPORTUNITIES

Employment opportunities are the most practical benefit I have gained from speaking Chinese well. I poured countless hours into my study of Chinese at college. The more I studied, the more determined I became to speak Chinese well and to put it to use outside of class.

By my senior year, I decided I wanted to move to China and become a journalist after college. Getting a foot in the door as a recent graduate is difficult in many industries, journalism included. There seems to be a surplus of experienced journalists seeking work in the struggling news industry, making competition for entry-level reporting jobs even tougher for candidates without real-world experience. I decided to move to China to pursue journalism after college, hoping my skill in Mandarin would give me the boost needed to secure a job as a reporter.

While living in Beijing, I secured my first job as a journalist in early 2009. I became the China correspondent for technology media company IDG, which owns technology news brands such as *PCWorld* and *Macworld*. After more than a year enjoying my job and my subject matter there, I received and accepted a job with Dow Jones Newswires. I worked at Dow Jones in

Beijing, and contributed to *The Wall Street Journal*, for about a year and a half. I then moved back to the United States to accept a different job at Dow Jones.

A manager at IDG said my fluency in Mandarin was a key reason that I got the job offer from them, despite my limited prior experience. My Mandarin also helped me get my job at Dow Jones, where speaking Chinese well was even more important because of the extremely time-sensitive nature of work at a financial newswire. For my applications to those jobs, I took tests that involved reading press releases in Chinese and writing English news articles about them.

Speaking Mandarin also helped me get my current job as a Foreign Service Officer at the U.S. Department of State. Candidates receive a bonus to their score on the Foreign Service entrance exam for speaking a foreign language. They receive further bonus points for speaking a difficult language such as Mandarin. Bonus points from Mandarin helped me increase my exam score enough to lock in a job offer.

2: COMPREHENSION OF VITAL INFORMATION

Speaking Mandarin well also boosted my performance in my China-based reporting jobs after I secured them. The reason why is probably obvious: To write news based on statements spoken or written by Chinese sources, I needed to be able to comprehend them. In time-sensitive cases, I needed to be able to comprehend those statements instantly so I could send headlines seconds faster than my employer's competitors.

I wrote many time-sensitive stories while working for Dow Jones Newswires, which competes with Reuters and Bloomberg to send "flash" headlines about breaking news that could affect the prices of assets such as stocks and commodities. For example, my job included the duty of monitoring the website of the People's Bank of China, the country's central bank. China's central bank often posts major announcements on its website without any advance warning. Announcements could include commentary on the finance industry in China, changes to the required minimum reserve level for banks, or changes in benchmark interest rates. Whenever the central bank posted a new announcement on its website, I would receive an alert via monitoring software. I had to open the link, identify any important news, and immediately send flash headlines on any market-moving news. To beat our competition in the most urgent cases, involving news about interest rate or reserve requirement changes, I had to send my first headline to subscribers within fifteen to twenty seconds of the announcement appearing on the central bank's website. The first headline would be something simple, such as, "China Central Bank Cuts Benchmark Interest Rates." Details followed in other headlines.

Of course, to succeed in this task I had to be able to comprehend instantly such central bank statements as, "中国人民银行决定下调存贷款基准利率 0.25 个百分点" ("People's Bank of China decides to reduce benchmark interest rates by 0.25 percentage points"). Such an announcement would sometimes include the central bank's reasoning behind the move, and I needed to include the reasoning in my story as well.

One small, non-financial example of Chinese making me more effective in my job: In 2012, when soon-to-be-President Xi Jinping visited Muscatine, Iowa, I was the pool reporter—the one print-news reporter allowed to go into a local home where he gave a short speech. President Xi's interpreter did not completely translate his remarks, but I was able to understand the original Chinese remarks and to provide a better pool report because of it. Most colorfully,

I caught the detail that President Xi, who also visited Iowa in 1985, told a young Iowan on his previous visit that he had watched the movie *The Godfather*. The interpreter didn't give that detail, but because I caught it, many news outlets used it in their stories about President Xi's visit to Iowa.

I could provide countless other examples of how I needed Mandarin to be able to comprehend newsworthy statements made in Chinese. I often needed specialized vocabulary, especially for news about economic issues, finance or technology. I interviewed government officials, economists, hackers, foreign policy experts, and CEOs and CFOs of technology companies. But further examples seem unnecessary to illustrate the point that my strong comprehension of Chinese made me more effective at reporting on statements made in that language.

3: MORE EFFECTIVE INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

Another way in which speaking Mandarin well benefited me: It smoothed my communication with sources and allowed me to get better results from interpersonal interactions. On good days, I could speak on the phone with a new contact for several minutes before the other party realized I was not Chinese. Some contacts only had this realization when I provided them my email address containing my English name. More generally, I was usually able to express complex thoughts and subtleties in my meaning when speaking Chinese with sources.

My Mandarin skills made my interpersonal communication with sources more effective in at least four ways. First, my ability to express a request clearly made it easy for sources to understand what I needed and to provide it. I constantly made requests for information by phone, email, fax and in person.

Second, I was sometimes able to hide the fact that I was a foreigner to get information from sources who were distrustful of foreigners. For example, several times I called police stations in remote parts of China to confirm events reported by local media, such as a protest or an explosion. If I said I was a foreigner or a reporter, the officer who answered would hang up. But if I simply asked my question in Chinese without clearly identifying myself, and if my accent sounded Chinese enough, then I might obtain helpful information.

Third, my Mandarin abilities sometimes allowed me to get information from distrustful sources through effective persuasion in the listener's native language. I found that sources with any connection to the government were usually hesitant to speak with foreigners. Examples included the staff of state-owned enterprises and official or semi-official research institutes. I often tried to gain the favor of such sources by explaining why it would benefit them to cooperate with me. For example, I recall explaining to people who answered the phones at various organizations that they should not hang up because my planned news article about their organization was negative, and I was offering them a chance to comment in their own defense. This usually was still insufficient to obtain much of substance from the source, but my ability to persuade in Mandarin nonetheless got me closer to that goal. Tangentially, I believe I was able to persuade more effectively in Chinese not only because of my Mandarin abilities, but also because of my knowledge about China's culture and society. I had some idea why people with a connection to the government were hesitant to speak to me, for example.

Of course, I was able to build up that knowledge base largely through interacting with Chinese people in Mandarin over a period of years.

Fourth, I earned some level of admiration and trust from many sources for the simple fact that I spoke Chinese well. My Mandarin often impressed sources, since the language is difficult and my accent was not as pronounced as that of most foreign speakers. My fluency in Chinese was an immediate sign to a contact that I had invested a large amount of time in learning about the listener's country. I found that many people in China admired the effort I had made to learn Chinese. Studying hard is a value taught by traditional Confucian culture and is still widely held in China today. I also believe some sources saw my fluency in Mandarin as representative of respect for China's people and culture. That, in turn, may have made some sources feel more inclined to help me with requests. I do not think I can quantify the benefits that I received from these factors, but I do believe that speaking Chinese well helped me gain the favor of some sources, making me more effective at gaining information from them.

4: LEARNING OTHER ASIAN LANGUAGES

The final way that Chinese has helped me professionally is by making it easier for me to learn other Asian languages. Although I have not rigorously analyzed this analogy, I feel that knowing Chinese has been as helpful in learning other Asian languages as it would be to know Latin before learning a European romance language.

I have studied both Japanese and Vietnamese since learning Chinese. Japanese uses Chinese characters in its writing system and has some cognates with pronunciation derived from Chinese words. When reading in Japanese, I could often guess the meaning of new *kanji* because I knew the characters from Chinese, even if I had no idea how to pronounce the words in Japanese. I studied Japanese for one year in graduate school and was able to progress fairly quickly because of my knowledge of Chinese.

Chinese has been even more helpful in my study of Vietnamese. I can share much more detail about this case because I have spent much more time learning Vietnamese, and also because China has had a vast historical influence on Vietnam. Of course, China had a major historical influence on the cultures and languages of many neighboring countries. But its influence on Vietnam was particularly great because China colonized Vietnam for more than one thousand years, from the 2nd century B.C.E. to the 10th century C.E. Scholars and officials in Vietnam continued to use Chinese for formal writing until the country's period of French colonization. Famous classical Vietnamese poets composed their works in Chinese characters. Vietnam used an exam system similar to China's to fill its bureaucratic ranks. Visitors to historical sites and pagodas in Vietnam will see Chinese characters in inscriptions and elsewhere. And the modern Vietnamese language retains many marks of China's influence.

5: VIETNAMESE AS A TONAL LANGUAGE

The use of tones in Vietnamese is a major mark of Chinese influence and the first reason that knowing Chinese helped me learn Vietnamese. Already knowing a tonal language helped me with Vietnamese for three reasons. I will elaborate upon each reason below. First, I already understood the concept of a tonal language. Second, I was able to remember the tones in Vietnamese—and also to control my pronunciation of them more effectively—because I could think of them as modified versions of Mandarin tones. Third, Vietnamese has borrowed many

words from Chinese. The tones in these words often transform from their Mandarin tones based on identifiable patterns, which made it much easier for me to remember Vietnamese vocabulary words with a Chinese origin. Such words are described as Sino-Vietnamese.

5.1 – The concept of tones: Understanding the concept of a tonal language before starting to learn Vietnamese helped me in at least two ways.

First, and most importantly, I came into Vietnamese class aware that correct tones are absolutely vital to being understood in conversation with a native speaker. Dr. Link said in one of my early Mandarin lectures that speaking Mandarin with no tones would sound something like speaking English with only a single vowel. If pronounced as “A am fram Amaraca,” then the sentence “I am from America” would probably still be understood by a native English speaker, but only with effort. Longer, more complex sentences would be totally incomprehensible.

My Vietnamese teachers told myself and my classmates that correct tones were important, but I am sure I understood that concept more fully than my classmates who had never previously learned a tonal language. Of course, stray tones become gradually more entrenched and harder to correct as one progresses further in a tonal language. Many students seem to realize the extreme importance of tones only after reaching a level at which is difficult to correct their pronunciation of them. This was precisely the experience of at least one of my classmates. After arriving in Vietnam and encountering difficulty in conversation with native Vietnamese speakers, she said wished she had fully realized the importance of tones much earlier in the course of her studies.

I certainly do not have perfect tones in Vietnamese, but I am sure my tones are better than they would have been if I had learned the language without already knowing Chinese. Since I knew how important tones would be, I tried to practice close control of them from the very start of my Vietnamese studies. As a result, I am now able to pronounce Vietnamese tones accurately enough for me usually to be understood in Vietnam.

The second way in which understanding the concept of tones helped me learn Vietnamese was by making it easier for me to pick up on ways that Vietnamese speakers modify their voices to express emotion or subtleties in meaning. I could then try to incorporate similar techniques in my own speaking.

A classmate in Vietnamese once asked how it is possible to convey emotion in spoken Vietnamese when the pronunciation of each syllable must conform to its prescribed tone. I gave him two examples of how one could express emotion: by adding sentence-ending particles that change the meaning of a sentence, and by elongating or shortening the tones of key words. One example of the latter in Chinese would be emphatically stretching out a third-tone word and dropping one’s tone lower than usual in the middle of it.

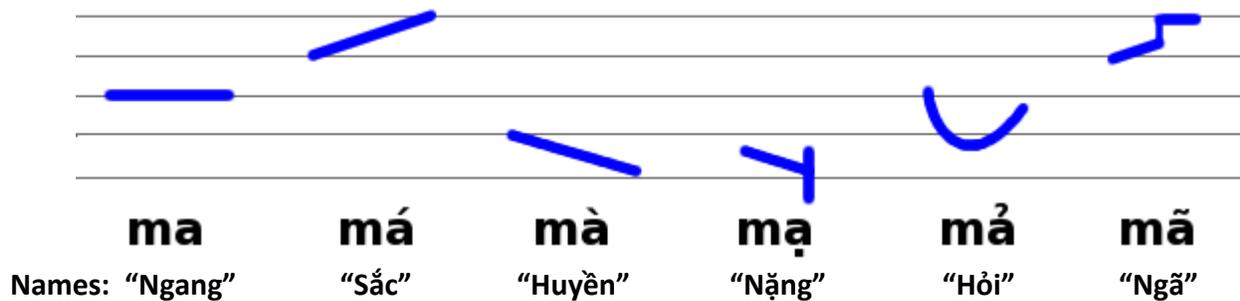
My colleague’s question reflected a common area of uncertainty for first-time learners of a tonal language. Changing tone or inflection is a primary way in which speakers of English express emotion and give other cues, such as when we end a sentence with a rising inflection to indicate a question. For a native English speaker, it at first seems unclear how to express emotion in a tonal language. In fact, speakers of tonal languages do vary their tones to express emotion and other cues, but it is difficult to grasp that concept until one has reached some intermediate level of fluency in a tonal language. I was able to advance in Vietnamese somewhat more quickly because I already understood that concept from the start.

5.2 – Vietnamese tones as modified Mandarin tones: There are also more mechanical ways, rather than conceptual ways, in which already knowing a tonal language benefited me as a Vietnamese student. First, to learn Mandarin and pronounce its tones successfully, I had to cultivate the ability to remain conscious of the pitch of my voice at all times. I internalized the idea that the briefest of lapses in this consciousness and control could change the meaning of my words. So, it was very easy for me to continue exercising this high level of consciousness over my pitch as I began learning Vietnamese.

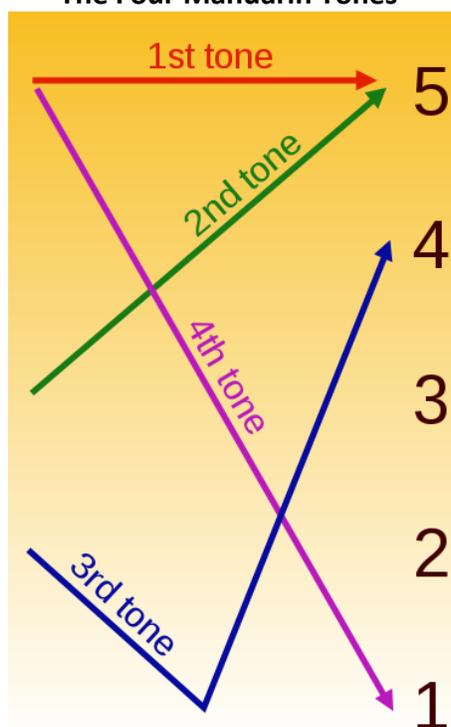
Second, as any Mandarin speaker probably would, I initially conceptualized Vietnamese tones as modified versions of Mandarin tones. No Vietnamese tone precisely matches a Mandarin tone, but this nonetheless made it easier for me to remember and correctly pronounce Vietnamese tones.

The following charts show impressionistic representations of the tones in Vietnamese and Mandarin. Unlike Mandarin tones, Vietnamese tones are not labeled numerically. Instead, each tone in Vietnamese has a unique name. There are six tones in the northern Vietnamese dialect and only five in the southern dialect. Southerners pronounce the tone labeled *ngã* in the same way as the tone *hỏi*, combining the two rightmost tones on the top graph into a single spoken tone. (Those two tones are still written differently on paper.) As a student of the southern dialect, I felt fortunate to have one less tone to keep track of while speaking.

The Six Vietnamese Tones¹



The Four Mandarin Tones²



¹ Image credit: ©Herr Klugbeisser / Wikimedia Commons / CC-BY-SA-3.0 / GFDL / https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Six_tones_of_Vietnamese_language.png

² Image credit: ©Wereon / Wikimedia Commons / CC-BY-SA-3.0 / GFDL / https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pinyin_Tone_Chart.svg

I identified and used the following comparisons as a baseline for my pronunciation of Vietnamese tones early in my studies: The tone *ngang* is like the Mandarin first tone, but pronounced in the middle of one's vocal register instead of near the top. The tone *sắc* is like the second tone in Mandarin, perhaps with a slightly less steep ascent. The tone *huyền* is like the Mandarin fourth tone, but it begins from the middle of one's vocal register instead of at the top, and therefore it descends less steeply. In the southern dialect, the tones *hỏi* and *ngã* are both similar to the Mandarin third tone, but they start near the middle of one's vocal register instead of near the bottom. On their descent, they do not fall as deep as the Mandarin third tone, and they do not rise back up again as sharply. Finally, the tone *nặng* is a bit like pronouncing only the first half of the third tone in Mandarin. It starts near the bottom of one's register and descends slightly, then stops.

I no longer had to rely on these comparisons as I progressed in Vietnamese class, but they helped me substantially at first.

5.3 – Patterns in Sino-Vietnamese tonal transformations: There are many Sino-Vietnamese words in Vietnamese. The tones in these words usually differ from their Mandarin versions, but they often change based on identifiable patterns. This made it easier for me to remember many Vietnamese vocabulary words. (Consonant and vowel sounds in Sino-Vietnamese words also often change from their Mandarin versions in an identifiable way, but for me, the basic useful takeaway was that Vietnamese words that start with a “t” often have a Chinese origin.)

I noticed some patterns in these tonal transformations on my own as a beginning Vietnamese student. I then attended a talk by Dr. Mark J. Alves, a Montgomery College linguist who studies the influence of Chinese on Vietnamese.³ He discussed more of these patterns in tonal changes and other topics regarding Sino-Vietnamese. His remarks provided some of the insights that I will include here.

First tones in Mandarin usually become a flat *ngang* tone in Vietnamese. For example, the Chinese word 公安 or *gōng ān* for “public security” is *công an* in Vietnamese. Compared to the Mandarin first tone, the main difference in the Vietnamese tone is the relatively lower register. Borrowed first-tone Chinese words were particularly easy for me to identify as a beginning Vietnamese student because their tones were very similar to those of Mandarin words I already knew. I immediately knew the meaning of the word *công an* the first time I heard it. I did not have to consult a dictionary or ask a teacher for its meaning. The same was true for various other Sino-Vietnamese words that sounded extremely similar to their Chinese counterparts.

Second tones in Mandarin often become falling *huyền* tones in Vietnamese, reversing their direction from rising to falling. Other times, second tones in Mandarin become flat *ngang* tones in Vietnamese. As an example of the former case, 和平 or *hé píng* for “peace” in Mandarin takes on tones of the reversed direction and is pronounced *hòa bình* in Vietnamese. Early on in Vietnamese, although I was able to recognize Sino-Vietnamese words, such as *hòa*

³ Mark J. Alves. “Learning Vietnamese for Those with Chinese Language Background.” Talk given at the National Foreign Affairs Training Center. Arlington, Virginia. January 14, 2016. Separately, some of Dr. Alves’s publications may be viewed at <http://montgomerycollege.academia.edu/AlvesMark>

being 和, I didn't realize until I heard Dr. Alves's talk that this tone reversal was a common pattern. Once I knew this, it became even easier for me to determine the Chinese origins of unfamiliar Vietnamese vocabulary words, which made it easier for me to retain new vocabulary.

Third tones in Mandarin usually become a dipping *hỏi* or *ngã* tone in Vietnamese. (Again, the latter two Vietnamese tones are pronounced the same in the southern dialect.) For example, 表演 or *biǎo yǎn* for "to perform" in Mandarin is *biểu diễn* in Vietnamese, with two consecutive dipping tones.

Fourth tones in Mandarin usually follow one of two possible transformation patterns when converted into Vietnamese. They often become a rising *sắc* tone, reversing their direction just as Mandarin's rising second tones usually become falling tones in Vietnamese. Other times, a Mandarin fourth tone becomes the low, drop-and-stop *nặng* tone in Vietnamese. For example, 制度 or *zhì dù* for "system" in Chinese is *chế độ* in Vietnamese. In the case of this two-syllable word, the first syllable follows the first transformation pattern for Mandarin fourth tones, becoming a rising tone. But the second syllable follows the other pattern, becoming the low-dropping Vietnamese tone.

Of course, any combination of the above patterns is possible within words made of multiple syllables. For example, 变成 or *biàn chéng* for "to become" in Chinese is *biến thành* in Vietnamese. The falling Mandarin tone of the first syllable reverses to a rising tone in Vietnamese, and the second syllable's tone similarly reverses. As one more example, the Chinese idiom 进退两难 or "jìn tuì liǎng nán," which roughly means "to be between a rock and a hard place," survives as an idiom in modern Vietnamese as well and is pronounced *tiến thoái lưỡng nan*. The first two syllables are both Mandarin fourth tones turned into rising Vietnamese tones; the third syllable is a Mandarin third tone that becomes a similarly dipping Vietnamese tone; and the final syllable follows the pattern of rising Mandarin tones transforming into flat *ngang* tones in Vietnamese.

Not all Sino-Vietnamese words follow the tone transformations described above, and there are some other identifiable patterns about when and how certain Mandarin tones tend to transform. But the above patterns seem particularly common and are the ones that have helped me the most as a student of Vietnamese.

Knowing the common transformation patterns for Mandarin tones has made it easier for me to learn and retain new vocabulary in Vietnamese. As the above examples show, there are often similarities between the vowel and consonant sounds in Sino-Vietnamese words, but those similarities are not always immediately obvious. It helps make the Chinese origins of a word more obvious when I also apply the tonal transformation patterns that I know and then consider whether the word sounds like something I know in Chinese. When I first saw the word *thám tử* in Vietnamese, for example, I tried reversing the first syllable to have a falling tone, and leaving the second syllable as a dipping tone. The result sounded something like 探子 or *tàn zǐ*. I correctly guessed that this meant "detective." *Tàn zǐ* sounds to me, at least, like an archaic way of saying "detective" in Chinese, but it is close enough to the more common 侦探 or *zhēn tàn* that I was able to guess its meaning. Moreover, the first time I saw this Vietnamese word, I immediately was able to commit it to memory. I did not need to study or review it to recall its meaning later because the word was so close to something I already knew in Chinese.

6: CHINESE GRAMMAR IN VIETNAMESE

Vietnamese is not fundamentally a Sinic language. Its roots purportedly have much more in common with Khmer than with Chinese. Basic aspects of grammar differ between Chinese and Vietnamese. Vietnamese also has many vocabulary words that are not derived from Chinese at all. These tend to be words associated with everyday use. Some examples would be verbs for common actions, like “to go” or “to eat,” and words for parts of the body or for common animals. Of course, there are many more, and they cover a broader range of objects and concepts than the examples listed above.

However, the use of tones in Vietnamese is not the only manifestation of the deep influence of Chinese on Vietnamese. Vietnamese also contains some grammatical structures that sound familiar to me as a Chinese speaker, and Sino-Vietnamese words compose a large proportion of existent Vietnamese vocabulary.

I can provide several examples of grammatical structures that Vietnamese seems to have borrowed from Chinese. First, the “although-but” structure exists in both languages. In both Chinese and Vietnamese, unlike in English, it is correct to start a sentence with “although,” and then to start the following clause with “but.” Take the following sample sentence: “Although I speak Chinese, I cannot write it.” In both Chinese and Vietnamese, one must include the word “but” after the comma.

Second, Vietnamese uses the Chinese structure in which a question word, like “who” or “where,” is followed by the word for either “also” or “all” to mean “all people/places/things.” For example, the sentence “谁也不知道,” or *shei yě bù zhī dào*, translates word-for-word as “who also does not know.” In Chinese this means, “Nobody knows.” Vietnamese uses the same structure. The same sentence in Vietnamese would be, “Ai cũng không biết.” The four words respectively mean “who,” “also,” “not,” and “know,” but the sentence means, “Nobody knows.”

Third, as mentioned previously, Vietnamese has sentence-ending particles that seem likely to be of Chinese origin. These do not seem to be used as frequently as in China, but they are still common. One example is the Vietnamese particle “*nhé*,” which functions somewhat like the Chinese particle 吧 or *ba*. In my own assessment, adding “*nhé*” to the end of a sentence in Vietnamese does not make the preceding statement a suggestion as forcefully as 吧 does in Chinese. However, it still more gently indicates a suggestion, or else confirmation of a plan upon which the speaker and listener have already essentially agreed. Using “*nhé*” seems akin to ending a sentence in English with, “okay?”

Fourth, in Vietnamese one can use something similar to the “verb-or-not-verb” structure of Chinese to pose certain questions. In Chinese, one can ask a question by making a statement and then adding on, “对不对,” or *duì bù duì*, which means, “correct or not correct?” In Vietnamese, the equivalent sentence-ending phrase is “*phải không*,” which is used in the same way and which means, “correct or not?”

It was easy for me to master all of the above grammatical structures in Vietnamese because I was already familiar with them from Chinese. I started Vietnamese class already capable of reorganizing my words, and perhaps my thoughts, in the way necessary to use the above structures correctly. That was not true for my classmates in Vietnamese who didn’t

already know Chinese. They were able to learn and use the above structures correctly as well, but I could do so more quickly.

The example that best demonstrates how Chinese helped me is probably the second one, used for sentences such as, “Nobody knows.” As a beginning student in Chinese, I recall feeling unnatural at first when using a phrase such as “where also” to mean “nowhere.” When I began studying Vietnamese, I was already accustomed to that structure and had no trouble using it in a new language.

7: VIETNAMESE WORDS BORROWED FROM CHINESE

I have already discussed how Sino-Vietnamese tonal transformation patterns helped me learn Vietnamese vocabulary. I can say a little more, though, about how knowing Chinese words helped me with Vietnamese.

In his talk that I attended, Dr. Alves said estimates based on dictionary counts find that as much as 70 percent of Vietnamese words have a Chinese root, but he said that is probably an overestimate because dictionaries do not precisely reflect how most people speak. On the other hand, Dr. Alves found that 25 percent of Vietnamese words in a 1,200-word sample that he took were Sino-Vietnamese, but he said that figure is probably an underestimate. Whatever the proper statistic, it is clear that Vietnamese has many words borrowed from Chinese.

Vietnamese words borrowed from Chinese tend to be words with abstract meanings and/or formal connotations. Words associated with public administration are often Sino-Vietnamese as well. Some examples: 社会 or *shè huì* for “society” in Chinese is *xã hội* in Vietnamese. The word 政府 or *zhèng fǔ* for “government” is *chính phủ*. And the word for “abstract” is itself a borrowed word: 抽象 or “*chou xiàng*” is *trừu tượng* in Vietnamese.

In a formal language-learning setting, at least, these are the kinds of words that a student must learn to become an advanced speaker. I was able to advance in my Vietnamese classes more quickly than my classmates because it was relatively easy for me to retain such vocabulary. For instance, I was able to start having basic conversations about international relations earlier than my classmates.

As an aside, one Vietnamese class session where I did not fare as well was the session on food-related vocabulary, which covered the names of foods, words for cooking styles, and how to order at a restaurant. This vocabulary was harder for me to remember because not much of it was Sino-Vietnamese. I intentionally studied the vocabulary from that section less closely, figuring I would forget it anyway and I could relearn it after moving to Vietnam. As a result, in one classroom activity that I distinctly remember, I could recall the names of barely any fruits, while my classmates could remember most of them.

Chinese has helped me learn Vietnamese vocabulary even when a new word with a Chinese root does not correspond exactly to a word I know in Chinese. Some two-syllable Vietnamese words contain one syllable with a Chinese root, while the other syllable is a native Vietnamese word. In those cases, I can still sometimes guess the meaning of the full word because I know the meaning of the Chinese character on which the first syllable is based. For example, there are many two-syllable Vietnamese words that start with the syllable *giảm*, which comes from 减 or *jiǎn* for “to reduce.” Regardless of what the second syllable is, the whole two-syllable word always means something close to “reduce.”

As with the earlier example of “detective,” there are also times when part or all of a Vietnamese word has a Chinese origin, but the corresponding Chinese characters aren’t ones that a speaker of modern Chinese would usually use together. One example of this is the word *đề dẫn*, which corresponds to the Chinese characters 題引, or *tí yǐn*. To my knowledge, there is no such word in modern Chinese, though it may exist in classical Chinese. I had to ask a teacher about this Vietnamese word. It turns out to mean “keynote speech.” This made some sense when I thought about the Chinese characters on which the word is based: 題 means “topic” or “subject,” and 引 can mean “to lead.” One could think of a keynote speech as “the leading topic” of a conference. I cannot recognize words like this and commit them to memory instantly, as I can with some Vietnamese words of more obvious Chinese origin. But knowing the Chinese root of the word still helps me retain such vocabulary after I learn it.

This especially is one sense in which I feel that Chinese is the East Asian equivalent of Latin for a language learner. When studying a language heavily influenced by either Chinese or Latin, it is easier to guess or remember the meanings of new words when one knows their Chinese or Latin roots. It was easy for me to remember the meaning of the word “ubiquitous” as a high school student because I knew that “ubi” meant “where” in Latin. I use precisely the same kinds of linkages to learn and recall Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary.

8. PITFALLS IN VIETNAMESE FOR MANDARIN SPEAKERS

Overall, Chinese has helped me vastly in my study of Vietnamese. However, I thought it would be interesting to describe the minor drawbacks to being a Mandarin speaker in Vietnamese class.

Knowing the Chinese origins of Sino-Vietnamese words has helped me retain vocabulary, but this approach to learning words occasionally causes me to pronounce Vietnamese words incorrectly or to combine Vietnamese syllables incorrectly. My Vietnamese teachers have taught many students who already knew Chinese, and their remarks on this topic suggest it is a bigger problem for some Chinese speakers than for others. I did not struggle with this often. Still, when I cannot clearly recall a Vietnamese word, I often think of the equivalent Mandarin word and then try to say the word in Vietnamese. I sometimes use incorrect tones as a result, or I put together two Vietnamese syllables that both come from Chinese but do not actually have the meaning I intended.

I also am not sure whether my Vietnamese tones remain influenced by my Chinese tones. I have not been told since early in my Vietnamese studies that I speak with a Chinese accent, but I also have not achieved perfect tones in Vietnamese. When going back and forth between flat and rising tones, I sometimes wonder if I pronounce my flat tones in too high of a register, perhaps because I am defaulting to the pronunciation of the high, flat first tone in Chinese. I’m also not highly confident in my low-dropping *nặng* tone in Vietnamese, which may be too strongly influenced by how I pronounce the dipping third tone in Chinese.

Finally, since I can recall Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary so much more easily than Vietnamese vocabulary without a Chinese origin, I tend to use Sino-Vietnamese words more often than other students—and more often than native speakers. Teachers sometimes say I sound too formal because of the frequency with which I use Sino-Vietnamese words. This is probably also a consequence of the fact that I learned Vietnamese mostly in a formal classroom

setting. Still, my reliance on Chinese in my studies has certainly affected the way I speak Vietnamese.

9. CONCLUSION

Studying Chinese in college was one of the best decisions I have ever made. Chinese helped me find a job in China as a reporter and to perform well in it. Then it helped me get my current job at the State Department, and it greatly facilitated my study of Vietnamese, which I am now using in my job in Vietnam. Chinese will almost certainly help me in future endeavors as well.

I am grateful for the chance to submit this essay and to participate in the associated conference. Thank you for reading.